Review of Innovative interventions to reduce dementia caregiver distress: A clinical guide

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Late in the history of research into dementia, the academic community has acknowledged the importance of the subjective experience of people with dementia. This is leading to a refocusing of emphasis in dementia research and service provision. Dementia nonetheless remains a family affair, and it is important that the needs of caregivers continue to be taken into account. This book provides a welcome fillip to thinking on care-giver interventions. It is edited by three well-known American old-age psychologists, and draws together contributions from diverse professionals on fundamental issues and practical interventions pertinent to the provision of services for dementia care-givers. It is intended for 'casual' as well as specialist professional readers, but will probably only appeal to those caregivers who are already quite well read and informed.

The mission of the book is not entirely clear. It is neither a manual, as implied by the title, nor a scholarly review, as implied by a key statement in the preface: 'we have sought to provide an overview of the current state of the art with respect to dementia caregiving intervention research' (p. xii). On the whole, the book gives insufficient detail for the reader to implement the described interventions, though there are generous offers throughout of materials that are available through websites or by contacting the authors. Nor is the review comprehensive, for many up-to-date references are given but influential work from outside and inside the United States is not included. Two examples are the work by Nolan, Grant and Keady (1996) on understanding care-giving as a dynamic, longitudinal process, and the widely known, dementia-specific Caregiver Hassles Scale (Kinney and Stephens 1989).

Rather than being a clinical guide or a thorough review, this book instead promotes a new direction in care-giver interventions, that involves holistic understanding and comprehensive interventions tailored to the stage of the dementia journey. A major focus is the description of work in progress, much of it linked to a multi-centre, multi-faceted research initiative termed REACH (Resources for Enhancing Alzheimer's Caregiver Health). The shift to not only intra-personal dynamics but also systemic, societal and political influences will be welcomed by many working in the field. One frustration from the many examples of current work is that their evaluation is incomplete, so effectiveness cannot be reported.

In addition to the emphasis on multi-pronged approaches, there is a strong and worthwhile message throughout the book on the need to be sensitive to cultural and individual differences in designing care-giver interventions. A strength of the book is its sensitive approach to several intimate issues that are rarely considered. Chapter 4 has a well handled discussion of how care-givers may cope with changes in sexual intimacy and urinary incontinence among spouses with dementia. In Chapter 13 on lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender care-givers, professionals' attitudes and service-users' experiences are addressed carefully and thoroughly, while in Chapter 12 on the contribution on male caregivers, there is a

useful account of recent research and of specific considerations for service provision. For readers outside the United States, Chapters 3 and 11 on minority ethnic issues may feel alien in their description of a very segregated society.

Sometimes tensions creep into the book, probably a reflection of broader trends in health and social care, as between the effort to provide templates that will ensure thorough assessment and high quality service provision, and the exhortation to ensure that all interventions are individually tailored. As long as the provider uses systematically developed blueprints flexibly, they can be useful guides to assessment and intervention at particular stages for particular problems. The examples in Chapter 8 (p. 171 *et sec.*) on the 'chronic care networks for Alzheimer's disease' are especially helpful.

Like many other edited books, this provides a varied mix. For me, the material was sometimes familiar and sometimes thought provoking, in parts not relevant to my context but in others pertinent and informative. The two most valuable chapters I found to be the first and the last, both of which provide considered commentaries from experienced and respected professionals on the state of the art and on ways forward in care-giver research and intervention.

References

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